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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two successful cases of home-school virtuous cycles of interaction using the concept of intersubjectivity to explore parent-school partnerships established between families and inner-city school staff who differed in cultural background. It reveals that in both cases high degrees of parent involvement in school occurred despite the fact that neither program had such involvement as an original goal. The study explores what features of each program are associated with parent involvement and to what extent these interactions between family and school staff can be characterized by their intersubjectivity. Data are derived from a follow-up study of the first six graduating classes of Central Park East in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City; and from Project FLAME (Family Literacy--Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando [Learning, Bettering, Educating]), an on-going family-literacy project in Hispanic neighborhoods. Both cases reveal how shared communication and the elimination of communication barriers developed from and contributed to shared goals between parents and teachers. (Contains 19 references.) (GLR)

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Intersubjectivity in Home-School Partnerships in Two Inner-City School Settings

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In urban, low-income schools the distance between the cultures of school staff and of students' families continues to grow. Attempts to bring the families closer to the culture of the school by changing the families without also changing the schools have not yielded much success (see Joffe, 1977 for examples of such failures). The case has been made that socio-cultural gulfs between home and school can best be bridged by a two-way flow of information between families and school staff, working together as partners in the education of the children (Fitzgerald & Goncu, 1993). Applying the concept of intersubjectivity from the developmental literature (e.g., Goncu & Becker, 1992; Trevarthen, 1989) to interactions among adults, we would expect such successful bridging to occur when families and school staff work together to establish a shared understanding and a mutually accessible mode of communication about the education of the children they share.

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) give one example of such adult interactions in their description of the relationship between a teacher and a consultant moving into a joint understanding: "The emerging intersubjectivity, created by building and refining joint concepts, moves both toward mutual trust" (p. 227). As Serpell (1993) points out, "Mutual respect is not enough; groups with diverse agenda need to identify shared goals and devise strategies for transcending conflict." Or, rather than focus on reducing

conflict, given the fact that "teachers and parents simply cannot meet as equals under most circumstances," Lemke (1993) suggests that bringing the conflict into the open actually can be beneficial.

Two common approaches used by schools to increase parent involvement in the education of their children are parent education and parent participation in governance (Fitzgerald & Goncu, 1993). Parent education takes a number of forms, from directly teaching parents how to interact with their children using methods preferred by educators, to teachers modeling behavior for parents who serve as classroom aides. Opportunities in governance also vary, from a simple advisory or merely token role in policy making, to giving parents the majority of votes on budgets and hiring decisions. Both of these approaches tend to be carried out in the language of the school, with school-defined goals, rather than mutually identified goals, organizing the family-school activities.

A recent study of shared decision-making in twelve schools in New Zealand (Capper, 1994) found a home-school mismatch in that "teachers tend to conceive of communications with parents in global organization terms, whereas parents tend to think of them in terms of their own children." Capper's model of a virtuous cycle of parental participation starts with a school using "parent friendly methods" of establishing home-school links, thereby engaging the parents. As more parents participate, school staff have positive expectations about parent participation, reinforcing the "parent

friendly methods," thereby increasing parent engagement. Under conditions of such a virtuous cycle, when parents raise issues that make staff uncomfortable, the staff manage their defensiveness and deal with the issues in such a way as to gain parent respect, which leads the school to open up further. As parents become more familiar with the more open school, they may raise more issues, and if the staff can continue to meet the issues head on rather than retreating or going on the attack to defend themselves, mutual trust and respect can be built as the foundation for fuller partnerships, without "creating the illusion of agreed on common ground" (Lemke, 1993).

Purpose of Paper

Two successful cases of home-school virtuous cycles of interaction are examined in this paper, using the concept of intersubjectivity to explore parent-school partnerships established between families and inner-city school staff who differed in cultural background. In both cases high degrees of parent involvement in school occurred despite the fact that neither program had such involvement as an original goal of the program. What features of each program are associated with parent involvement? To what extent can the interactions between family and school staff be characterized by their intersubjectivity?

Data Sources and Methods

One set of data comes from the follow-up study of the first six graduating classes of Central Park East (1978-1983) in the East (or Spanish) Harlem neighborhood of New York City (Bensman, 1994, in press) and the other from Project FLAME (Family Literacy--Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando [Learning, Bettering, Educating]), an ongoing family literacy project in Hispanic neighborhoods in Chicago (Shanahan & Rodriguez-Brown, 1993). Detailed information about each program can be found in the citations for each program.

The New York data derive from telephone surveys of graduates, supplemented with in-depth face-to-face interviews with a subset of graduates and their parents (Bensman, in press). Of 135 students who had graduated from sixth grade by 1983, 117 (87%) were located, 90 were interviewed by phone, 40 were interviewed in person, and 20 of their parents were interviewed as well, in addition to interviews with school personnel. Family characteristics include almost 60 percent African American, about 30 percent Hispanic (primarily Puerto Rican), and the remainder Euro-American; the majority of mothers were employed outside the home, many of them in occupations requiring education beyond high school. In a 1985 survey, over half the students came from families below the median income level.

The Chicago data also come from interviews, with field notes, observations, and data from related studies available as well. Of 79 parents active in Project FLAME in the first two years, 21

contributed data for interviews (Owen, Li, Rodriguez-Brown & Shanahan, 1993); 13 who became trainers of their peers participated in further interviews (Bevington, Rodriguez-Brown & Shanahan, 1993), and 3 formed the nucleus of an ethnographic study of home-based literacy (Mulhern, 1993). All of these parents were from Mexico and were limited in their English proficiency. On average, the parents had been in the United States less than ten years and had completed fewer than eight years of schooling. Any maternal employment that existed allowed weekday participation by the mothers in the project's parent education classes. The three- to five-year-old children who were the targets of the intervention were students in or planned to enroll in Chicago public schools characterized by high enrollments and academic achievement below national norms, serving large numbers of families with low incomes and whose predominant home language was Spanish.

Brief program descriptions

At first glance, the main thing these two educational programs have in common is the dissimilarity of the educators' backgrounds from those of the families being served. In the first years of Central Park East, New York public school teachers conceived and implemented an experiment in applying John Dewey's theory of progressive education and Jean Piaget's theory of child development in a public school serving children from families with far less

education and social status than those usually found in progressive private schools.

Project FLAME, now in its fifth year, is a university-based literacy program for Hispanic parents who have limited proficiency in English, located in three Hispanic elementary public schools. Neither program is community based in the sense of grassroots origin and control, nor did either program begin as an attempt to involve parents in school other than as supporters of their children's learning.

However, the founders of both programs were committed to building on the strengths of children whose demographic characteristics do not bode well for school success. Both programs are child-centered, informed by research on how children learn and are motivated to learn. This research is put into practice directly by the Central Park East teachers and indirectly in Project FLAME via the parents for whom the university personnel have modeled the pedagogical methods in their own teaching. The careful attention to the needs of the individual children provided the primary impetus in both programs for the educators to form partnerships with the families of the children.

Parent involvement: Central Park East schools

In an earlier study, when most of the children were still at the pre-college level, Bensman (1987) documented a certain lack of parental agreement with Central Park East's pedagogical practice,

whose basis in Dewey's and Piaget's theories differed substantially from the practice in the junior high and senior high schools receiving the sixth-grade graduates.

Admitting that the jargon of progressive education can make such distrust reasonable, especially among the parents least similar to the staff in race and class, the founding director of the schools, Deborah Meier (1992), pointed to the school's usual response to such parents. The child's achievements would be pointed out to the parent, who would be asked: "Is this good enough? If not, what can we do better?" Three-way conferences among parent, teacher, and student were designed to make each participant feel more powerful, emphasizing the strengths of all, and each one leaving with "some plans for ways to celebrate" those strengths.

Parental fears that progressive education methods would leave their children ill-equipped for education beyond the elementary grades seemed to have dissipated by the time of the systematic interviews conducted after 95% of the first six classes had completed high school successfully and 66% had enrolled in college (Bensman, in press). Of the graduates in the follow-up study who responded, 97 percent reported parental satisfaction with the school. Parents who were interviewed offered many detailed reflections on the respectful home-school partnerships and productive involvement of the parents in school affairs that had gone beyond home support of children's school learning. Such

involvement included active participation in Family Conferences, which engaged teachers, parents, and students in the solution of "discipline" problems; parent involvement in Staff Review of individual students' strengths and weaknesses; and active participation in lobbying, fundraising, and other institution-building activities.

Despite the fact that Central Park East I was established "to realize the dream of teacher control and professionalism" (Bensman, in press), the staff recognized that the family-school partnership was a key ingredient in educational success. Some parents chose the school because of compatibility in values and orientation, but others were directed to it as a school of last resort for children with problems that other schools had not been able to handle.

Whatever the method of entry, as soon as a child enrolled the school staff invested large amounts of time in parent education about the school's methods, through weekly newsletters and formal parent-teacher association meetings, communicating about each child via report cards in the form of extended letters and in individual conferences. As one parent described it: "The parent-teacher meetings were very good, because they knew the children very well. . . . they weren't just giving you a report, they knew things that only a parent or someone that's around them constantly would pick up on." Parents who were anxious about what they perceived as lack of preparation for competitive junior high schools had fears allayed by detailed reports on student progress; as one such parent

reported, "I knew what my kids were doing" after receiving two handwritten pages of evaluation from the teacher rather than just letter grades.

Many of the parents interviewed credited the warm personal relationships, "like an extended surrogate family," with drawing them in and making them enthusiastic participants in the school. One parent who described the school as "like a family unit" felt comfortable expressing her opinions to the staff: "If I disagreed with something the teacher did, I gave her that respect and I spoke to her, not in front of my son, but I felt confident to say, 'I don't like the way you did this.' And then everything was fine. Nothing would be held against my kids."

Involvement in the school--at the classroom level, in the PTA, lobbying governing bodies for more resources--led a number of the parents to credit the school with helping them to develop as more mature adults and as better parents. One parent, who was herself a teacher at another public school, followed the model of CPE staff in dealing with behavior problems that made her describe her daughter as "such a monster:" "There was some trouble at the school involving five or six students. I went in ready to punish my child because I knew that she was the leader. Her teacher said, 'Slow down, back down; listen first and don't be so quick to judge her.' And that was a lifelong lesson. My role became one of support as opposed to constantly saying, 'It's your fault, what did you do?' I'd have to listen and say, 'Share with me, so that if I

have to go in and defend you, I know what really went down.' So she became pretty honest that way," and subsequently went on to academic success.

Despite the fact that the school had not been designed to share educational decision making with parents, parental participation in the "school family," and staff openness to their concerns, led parents to contribute to educational planning. As one parent said, "The teachers at CPE make you feel that you're a part of their decision-making; they don't shun you. You feel that what you say and what you do there is important."

Parent involvement: Project FLAME

In Project FLAME, parents' initial literacy knowledge and attitudes differed from the educators' theories of early literacy development in children, on which the program was based (Owen, Li, Rodriguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1993). Not only have the parents become enthusiastic participants in home-based literacy interactions with their children, the warm and respectful relationships with the university personnel have encouraged the participants to become involved in many aspects of their children's schools, including four who hold office in policy-making bodies in the schools--two on Local School Councils and two on bilingual committees (Bevington, Rodriguez-Brown, and Shanahan, 1993).

Unlike the interviewees in the CPE follow-up, the Mexican-born Project FLAME parents are at the beginning of their parenting

careers, and have little if any educational experience comparable to that their children will have in large, over-crowded, English-medium Chicago schools. Targeted to parents of children aged 3 to 5 years old, the four goals of the project are to increase the ability of the parents to provide literacy opportunities for their children; to increase their ability to act as positive literacy models; to improve their skills so that they can more effectively initiate, encourage, support, and extend their children's literacy learning; and to increase and improve relationships between the families and schools. As an opportunity for early outreach between school and parents, the last goal was designed to smooth some of the potential discontinuity between home and school when the languages of each are not the same (Shanahan & Rodriguez-Brown, 1993).

University personnel, rather than school personnel, are the point of contact with the parents, delivering the English as Second Language classes, modeling parent-child literacy and instructional activities, and providing material support for parents to increase literacy experiences at home. However to increase parental understanding of the school environment even before the children enter the elementary grades, the project introduced the parents to school staff in school tours and classroom observations. Special meetings are set up in a relaxed social setting to bring together parents and teachers from the schools their children will attend. Parents demonstrate what their children have learned and the

teachers thereby become aware of the family's literacy efforts. Parents can become comfortable with communicating with school staff outside of the teacher's classroom domain. Teachers can give the parents an understanding of the expectations they will have for the children, and parents can do the same.

After two years in the program, parental attitudes and child performance in the literacy arena showed significant program effects (Owen et al., 1993). In addition, teachers of children whose parents had been in the program reported greater parental involvement in their children's education than other parents. Nearly all of 15 teachers of program children who were surveyed said that program parents, compared to other parents, spent more time in the schools, many as volunteers; more than others they checked on the progress of their children, asked questions, and implemented teacher suggestions more readily. One of the school staff commented: "I believe the FLAME program besides teaching them English language skills has allowed them (parents) to become more comfortable with all school personnel and enhanced their self-confidence. Once this confidence has been obtained they generally are more participatory in all school functions as their time and circumstances allow."

After two years in the program, parents report that they have learned to see themselves as teachers of their children, with knowledge that is valuable to impart in whatever language they are comfortable, setting an example for the children with their own

literacy activities. Increased confidence is a recurring theme in responses to interview questions about what they have learned and how they have grown in the program. They report being able to see the teacher's point of view, to communicate with the teachers, and even be friends with them, despite lack of fluency in a common language.

Effects unintended by the program have been changes in family dynamics, including increased interaction between children and their fathers and improved childrearing and discipline techniques. When asked what the most important things were that her family had gained from Project FLAME, one mother responded: "My family has become more united as a result. My husband has witnessed what a change spending more time with his children can do. He has changed and really enjoys his sons more now. . . . My children now have a more responsive father who is more interested in what they learn, in what I learn."

Beyond the increase in functional literacy, parents have developed more critical attitudes to institutions in their lives, including running for and winning election to Local School Councils and bilingual advisory committees. Building on this success, Project FLAME expanded to work with a group of parents to be become trainers of other parents, to extend what they have learned into the community beyond the constraints of the temporary funding of the university-based project. As one parent noted: "I am more confident of myself as a helpful mother. I have lost my fear of

speaking English in public. I have learned ideas from classmates and teachers and it has opened my mind. We feel powerful when we come to school meetings. We sit together and we feel useful. People ask me for help and I can help them. I can get what I want, achieve and participate more."

Contributions to intersubjectivity across programs

To what extent do these cases illustrate the features of intersubjectivity--a mutually accessible mode of communication about the children and a shared understanding between home and school that comes from building and refining joint concepts? How do they illustrate the development of a "virtuous cycle" of home-school interaction?

In the Central Park East schools some parents were attracted specifically because they shared the schools' commitment to progressive principles and already spoke that particular language of the school. But other parents did not share, or even were put off by the school's jargon. However, in their dedication to a child-centered pedagogy and a concern with the child as a whole human being rather than primarily a mind achieving cognitively, the school staff spoke directly to each parent about each child. Teachers used a concrete form of describing the child's strengths and what needed to be worked on: "They knew things that only a parent or someone that's around them constantly would pick up on."

Differences in mother tongue can be an insurmountable barrier to communication in some schools. But with the mediation of Project FLAME staff, Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants gained confidence to overcome that barrier. This communication process is an excellent example of a virtuous cycle. Project-provided opportunities brought teachers and parents together to discuss expectations for the children. Parents were encouraged by teacher receptivity to continue crossing the language barriers; teachers were impressed with the parents' dedication to education and efforts to support their children's learning. Participation in Project FLAME validated the parents' ability to share their own valuable knowledge in their home language. With this confidence, they took advantage of school-offered opportunities to get involved and become active, even to the point of being elected to the governing bodies of their child's school. Regardless of whether or not school personnel spoke specifically about a parent's child, the parents could relate the message to their own children.

In both the New York and Chicago cases, the shared communication developed from and contributed to shared goals. In the Central Park East schools, many examples of teachers going beyond their classroom roles to meet the needs of children convinced parents of their mutual dedication to the whole child; in turn, despite full-time jobs and other obligations, the parents became involved in meeting the needs of the school, which gave them more opportunities to build friendships with the school staff. One

goal of Project FLAME is to increase the continuity between home and school in order to ease the transition of children from home and home-language to school, and the focus is on the communication activities encompassed by the reading and writing of parents and children, but also the receptivity of teachers to discovering and supporting the achievement-related goals that the project enabled parents to articulate for their children and to share with classroom teachers.

While there was much evidence in both cases of significant parent education, the extent to which there is receptivity to parents "educating" the school is not as clear for Project FLAME as for the Central Park East Schools. In one study of Project FLAME parents, most of whom had less than high school educations, 85% believed United States schools to be inferior to Mexican schools (Bevington, Rodriguez-Brown, & Shanahan, 1993). This may explain their motivation to get involved in their children's education, and those participating in school governance may have some impact on school improvement activities. But how many well-educated school staff are likely to be receptive to such opinions from people they perceive to be lacking much experience in schools at all, not even as students, much less as professionals? Is this an arena in which the virtuous cycle could flounder and shift to a vicious one of defensiveness and decreasing understanding of the other? Or could the school's willingness to listen lead to partnerships with parents in creating more responsive education for all?

Implications

These interview data provide an opportunity to test the application of the perspective of intersubjectivity developed by Fitzgerald and Goncu (1993) in cases of successful programs of education in public schools in urban, low income neighborhoods. The Central Park East data relate to a period of twenty years of innovation in educational methods for a school with great diversity in students and in staff. Data from Project FLAME are from families whose language, recent immigrant status, and own educational histories would make parent involvement unlikely. The experiences of these programs in establishing successful two-way communication between families and school staff provide positive models for other challenging school settings.

Issues to pursue in further research include questions of scale. The number of parents served in Project FLAME is a very small percentage of the parent populations of each school in which it has been carried out. The hallmark of CPE schools is the intimacy that their small size allows to develop. To what extent is the success of each program dependent on the intensity of interpersonal relationships that such a small scale affords? In the growing movement to partition very large schools into schools-within-a-school, do more opportunities for intersubjectivity arise than before the partition? If not, what distinguishes the more successful units from those in which home-school relations have not become more bidirectional?

While not being the most important factor, self-selection of parents in FLAME and of parents and staff in CPE may have contributed to the like-mindedness of the groups. What support is needed to create similar results in the more typical situation where neither the staff nor the parents have made a deliberate choice of the school or education program, where indeed there may be few if any two-way channels of communication between home and school?

As a preschool and kindergarten program, Project FLAME capitalizes on the greater involvement of parents that we see in early childhood education, and sets patterns for interactions with educational personnel. And in the first years of existence, Central Park East focused on the primary grades. What conditions are necessary to keep parents involved and to facilitate continuing attempts at intersubjectivity as their children progress through school beyond the primary grades?

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